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CAIRO FOR REFCOORD
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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PREF PREL KPAL IZ JO
SUBJECT: 2,200 REFUGEES LANGUISH ON IRAQI-JORDANIAN BORDER

REF: AMMAN 2427

(U) Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

11. (SBU) Summary and Comment: On June 24, Amman-based regional refcoord and PRM DART-Iraq team members visited UNHCR refugee camps on the Jordanian-Iraqi border and in Ruweished, Jordan. Combined population for the two camps remains near 2,200: 1,200 Iranian Kurds from Al Tash refugee camp and other undocumented nationals in no-man's land (NML) between the Iraqi and Jordanian border posts, as well as 899 Palestinians and 163 Somalis and Sudanese in UNHCR's refugee camp at Ruweished. The Somalis and Sudanese, previously held in the Jordan Red Crescent's TCN transit camp, were moved to the UNHCR camp on June 23 as part of the GOJ's decision to close the TCN transit camp. The NML population has begun to decrease, with 44 Iranian Kurds having left for northern Iraq and another 75 considering a move in the near future. The MEK population in NML has dwindled from its original 96 members to just five. Although concerned by the poor living and security conditions in NML, both the GOJ and UNHCR have indicated they are willing to support the NML camp until a solution can be found for the Iranian Kurds from Al Tash refugee camp. End summary and comment.

NML Population: Al Tash Kurds ...

12. (U) UNHCR reports that the refugee population in no-man's land (NML) between the Iraqi and Jordanian border posts of Trebil and Karameh has remained stable at roughly 1,200 since mid-May. 1,100 of the refugees are Iranian Kurds from UNHCR's Al Tash refugee camp near Ramadi, Iraq. The Al Tash Kurds began arriving at the border on April 14, citing a lack of UNHCR services, general insecurity and fear of political reprisals from neighboring Arab tribes as their reasons for fleeing Al Tash refugee camp (ref). The Kurds have held daily protests since mid-May, demanding entry to Jordan and resettlement in third countries - but attracting no notice from the hundreds of journalists that pass through the Jordanian-Iraqi border en route to Baghdad.

13. (U) Since May 29, when the GOJ told the Kurds they would not be allowed to enter Jordan, more than 40 Iranian Kurds have left NML for the northern Iraqi village of Kallar, just outside Suleimaniyah, where some of the Kurds have relatives. Another 75 are considering leaving NML for Kallar but are unwilling to do so without guarantees from UNHCR and the coalition forces regarding safety, security, humanitarian assistance and resettlement possibilities in a third country - possibly the United States. The 75 Kurds told UNHCR they could convince another 600 to leave NML for northern Iraq if UNHCR could provide written guarantees for resettlement. The Kurds told PRM officers that they view a move to northern Iraq as temporary, a transit point as they seek asylum in a third country. The NML Kurds also reported "several hundred" Kurds have left Al Tash refugee camp for Kallar, wooed by promises made by visiting PUK officials that they would have a better life in northern Iraq. UNHCR/Iraq has been unable to confirm how many Kurds have left Al Tash camp for northern Iraq. UNHCR/Iraq also has advised UNHCR/Jordan that it would be unable to support an assisted movement of NML Kurds to northern Iraq before November, as it has neither sufficient staff nor services in place to accommodate a new refugee population. Frustrated by UNHCR's slow response, some of the 75 Kurds are considering moving to Kallar without UNHCR assistance.

14. (U) The core group of 1,000 Iranian Kurds in NML refuses to return to Iraq, claiming it is a "jail" in which they suffered for 23 years, restricted to Al Anbar governorate and deprived of social and economic opportunities. The Kurds told PRM officers that they doubt that the change in Iraq's leadership will bring changes in their situation, claiming they suffer from poor UNHCR management as well as discrimination from local Arab tribes. (Some of the Kurds claim, for example, that their applications for resettlement or voluntary repatriation to Iran languished for three or

four years without a response from UNHCR.) Some of the Kurds also claim they cannot return to their native Iran, as they are political opponents of the clerical regime and would face certain death or imprisonment if they returned home. (Several hundred Iranian Kurds from Al Tash camp had in fact been rejected for voluntary repatriation by the Iranian government.) The Al Tash Kurds in NML therefore see resettlement in a third country as their only option. Although the GOJ has indicated it would be willing to allow the Kurds to transit Jordan if they had onward documentation and tickets for resettlement in a third country, UNHCR (correctly, in our opinion) refuses to conduct resettlement screening from NML, fearing it would create a pull factor for disgruntled refugees and Iraqi nationals from throughout Iraq.

... and a Hodgepodge of Undocumented Others

15. (U) NML also is home to another 100 or so people with document problems, a hodgepodge of nationalities and political problems. The original group of NML residents - 96 Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK) members -- has dwindled to just five, three of whom have onward travel documentation for the UK and are waiting to sort out the details. Six self-described Iranian Persians (former POWs and Iranian oppositionists) also fled Al Tash refugee camp and are seeking resettlement in a third country. Two undocumented Jordanian Palestinians, who seem to have fled Jordan after Black September, also remain at the border hoping for resettlement. A group of 41 undocumented Palestinians who arrived after the GOJ reverted to pre-war border practices for Palestinians on May 22 (see para 7 for details) also remains in NML, hoping to enter - and presumably resettle in - Jordan. As with the Iranian Kurds, UNHCR has told this group it cannot be processed for a durable solution - including resettlement in a third country - as long as it remains in NML. Like the Kurds, this group refuses to return to Iraq.

Palestinians and TCNs in UNHCR's Ruweished Refugee Camp

16. (U) UNHCR's refugee camp at Ruweished, Jordan is now home to 899 Palestinians from Baghdad and 163 Somalis and Sudanese, moved from the Jordan Red Crescent's TCN transit camp on June 23 after the GOJ decided to close the camp. This group of Somalis and Sudanese are long-term residents of Iraq who refuse to return to their country of origin but also are unwilling to return to Iraq. UNHCR has interviewed this group and found that only four qualify for UNHCR refugee status.

17. (SBU) The GOJ agreed to admit the Palestinians to the UNHCR refugee camp on April 21, seemingly in the hopes that its gesture would encourage UNHCR to move the Al Tash Kurds to a new refugee camp just inside the Iraqi border. Once the GOJ opened the border to Palestinians, a small but steady stream began, resulting in more than 1,100 Palestinians in the UNHCR refugee camp by mid-May. On May 22, the GOJ reverted to its pre-war immigration policy for Palestinians, allowing only those with proper documentation and prior permission from the General Intelligence Directorate to enter Jordan. (This policy remained in place for all other Jordanian borders - including the Allenby bridge - throughout the war.) This decision, coupled with terrible sandstorms in late May, has led to a gradual exodus from the camp. As conditions worsen in the camp over the summer, UNHCR expects that still more Palestinians will give up and return to Baghdad.

18. (SBU) Nearly one-third of the Palestinians in the Ruweished refugee camp are "mixed marriages," Palestinian-Jordanian women (carrying Jordanian passports) married to Palestinian-Iraqi men (with either Iraqi or no documentation). UNHCR believes that the GOJ will eventually allow this group - roughly 300 individuals - to enter Jordan. According to the camp committee, the remainder of the group seeks resettlement in a third country, preferably in northern Europe where some of the Palestinians have relatives. The Palestinians represent a mix of 1948 refugees (all of whom were originally from Haifa, and fled Palestine with the retreating Iraqi army), 1967 refugees and other Palestinians who were thrown out of the Gulf in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. (Although the camp committee members did not mention this to PRM officers, the Palestinian community in Iraq also includes various rejectionist factions.)

19. (U) The Palestinians told PRM officers that Iraq is "finished" for them. As a minority within Iraq's Sunni minority, they fear they will be the first to suffer political reprisals from the Shi'a majority. The Palestinians also said Iraqis view the Palestinians as, at

best, having been a privileged group under Saddam's regime and, at worst, supporters of the Saddam regime. This is the reason, they said, that Palestinians have been kicked out of their homes in Baghdad. (NOTE: Other Palestinians have reported that economics, rather than politics, led to a rise in their bargain-basement rents, previously enforced by Saddam's regime.)

19. (SBU) The Palestinians also rejected a theoretical return to an independent state of Palestine, emphatically telling PRM officers that they are from Haifa, inside Green-Line Israel and would not be welcome there. A return to the West Bank or Gaza, they said, would not be a return to their country of origin. Moreover, the GOJ's reluctance to accept more Palestinian refugees rules out local integration as an option. For these Palestinians, resettlement is perceived as their only option. (NOTE: Palestinian refugees outside UNRWA's areas of operations - e.g., Iraq - fall under UNHCR's mandate and therefore could be considered for resettlement as a durable solution. However, the fact that these Palestinian refugees are now under UNHCR protection in an area of UNRWA operation - Jordan - poses difficult legal questions for the two agencies. Moreover, as UNHCR Jordan Representative Sten Bronee noted to PRM officers, UNHCR's predominantly Arab-origin expatriate staff in the Middle East express great resistance to the idea of resettling any Palestinian refugees, due to the implications of such resettlement for the larger Palestinian refugee question.)

Camp Management and Cost Issues

10. (U) UNHCR and its implementing partners - the Hashemite Charitable Organization, CARE, OXFAM and Japan Platform - continue to provide services in the Ruweished and NML camps. MSF, which had been providing additional medical assistance and some psycho-social counseling, ended its program on June 130. WFP is ending its food assistance on June 30, citing its usual policy of providing assistance only to refugee populations of more than 5,000 people. ICRC and UNHCR will continue to provide food assistance. Medical and dental care is emerging as a key issue for the NML camp, as UNHCR is required to obtain special GOJ authorization to bring NML residents into Jordan for specialized treatments. (The nearest hospital is in Ruweished, Jordan - 75 km from the NML camp.) Several NML refugees complained to PRM officers that they had not received adequate medical treatment due to the difficulties in traveling outside NML. Refugee morale seems to have improved in recent weeks, due largely to the efforts of a UNHCR community services officer, seconded by Save the Children.

11. (U) UNHCR and IOM currently are in negotiations over how to handle the costs of caring for the 163 TCNs moved to the UNHCR refugee camp on June 23. UNHCR has recognized only four of these TCNs as refugees but has agreed to provide basic services on humanitarian grounds. Water is likely to emerge as a key cost-sharing issue for UNHCR and IOM. After three months of supplying water for the then-three refugee camps from the municipality of Ruweished, the GOJ has determined that it no longer can do so. The GOJ turned on the partially USAID-funded reverse osmosis (RO) water treatment unit on June 23, enabling UNHCR to supply water for the two camps from the GOJ-dug well near the Ruweished refugee camp. UNHCR officials note that the GOJ turned on the RO unit just a few days after the USAID-financed maintenance contract expired on June 11. UNHCR is now in negotiations with the GOJ over the cost of maintaining this unit. UNHCR estimates that it will require USD 2 million to run the two camps for another six months.

Comment

12. (SBU) The GOJ's initial decision not to admit the Iranian Kurds to Jordan has remained firm and we anticipate that it will not change. Although UNHCR initially considered creating a new camp for the Kurds just inside the Iraqi border, it has now ruled out the possibility, arguing that a new camp would create a pull factor for disgruntled nationals and refugees from throughout Iraq and create false expectations for resettlement in a third country. UNHCR also believes a new cross-border camp would allow the GOJ to formally close the door to asylum seekers. We agree with UNHCR's assessment. Both the GOJ and UNHCR have indicated they are willing to support the NML camp until a solution can be found for the Iranian Kurds from Al Tash refugee camp. In the meantime, we are working with UNHCR to identify solutions, including a return to Iraq and possibly resettlement for some Iranian Kurds in the United States.

13. (SBU) The Palestinians' situation is both more complicated and potentially more manageable. The division of responsibility between UNHCR and UNRWA is a legal and

political morass, from which a durable solution for this group of Palestinians is unlikely to emerge. Yet given the Palestinians' strong ties to Jordan, UNHCR believes (and we agree) that the GOJ eventually will admit some - if not all - of the Palestinians to Jordan. However, it is unlikely that the GOJ will take any action regarding the Palestinians until the situation at NML has been resolved.

¶14. (U) CPA Baghdad minimize considered.
GNEHM